

4-1-1967

Duncan Glen. Hugh McDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance. Edinburgh & London. W. & R. Chambers Ltd. 1964. 294 pp. 37 s. 6 d.

Louis Simpson  
*University of California, Berkeley*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Simpson, Louis (1965) "Duncan Glen. Hugh McDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance. Edinburgh & London. W. & R. Chambers Ltd. 1964. 294 pp. 37 s. 6 d.," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, 234–236.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol4/iss3/10>

This Book Reviews is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Duncan Glen. *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance*. Edinburgh & London. W. & R. Chambers Ltd. 1964. 294 pp. 37s. 6d.

There is a great book to be written about Hugh MacDiarmid—the pseudonym for Christopher Grieve. But to write it a man would have to write a history of modern Scotland, as well as a biography. For MacDiarmid has created almost single-handed the literary movement which has put Scotland on the map; and in order to understand MacDiarmid, one must have some grasp of Scotland's culture in all its aspects. This claim may seem exaggerated, but it is true; whether one is for or against MacDiarmid, one cannot deny his importance.

It was after the First World War that Christopher Grieve began experimenting with "synthetic Scots," that is, a language compounded of old Scots and the vernacular, in which he wrote his first notable poems, "The Watrigaw," "The Eemis Stane," and the rest. These brief lyrics, in their vivacity of speech and intensity of vision, got the author as much fame as may be had in Scotland—which, unfortunately, is not much. With the publication of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, in 1926, MacDiarmid was hailed in some quarters as a master. But while he was writing poems he had also been publishing criticism—harsh words about nearly everything and everyone, with smart blows at such sacred cows as "the Burns cult." He had been particularly critical of those Scots who had gone English, in politics or art, and as this category included a large number of educated Scotsmen, he had made powerful enemies. For a while MacDiarmid lived and worked in London; the experience was a watershed, involving him in domestic troubles and intellectual decisions that changed his life profoundly. Then we have a period of withdrawal to the bleak Shetlands, with his second wife, Valda Trevlyn. There, in real poverty, he continued to write poems and Marxist polemics. After years of neglect by the critics and the public, MacDiarmid is settled in a cottage at Candymill, near Biggar. His books are read in Europe and China, and there may come a day when they are read in America. He is, in my opinion, the most important living British poet.

MacDiarmid is a mass of contradictions, as he himself cheerfully points out in his autobiography, *Lucky Poet*. He is a Communist and a Scottish Nationalist—a contradiction that has sometimes proved indigestible to both Communists and Nationalists. In one of his

## REVIEWS

lyrics he says that a golden lyric is worth more than any amount of argument; but in one of his later, long argumentative poems in English, he exclaims against those "seductive voices" that would have him give up didactic writing and return to lyrics. The inventor of "synthetic Scots," or Lallans, in his later works has returned to English, leaving behind him a school of Lallans-writers, gasping high and dry.

In "The Kind of Poetry I want," MacDiarmid has called for "a poetry of facts." In other passages, he has recommended flights of pure speculation. The hard-hitting, sometimes vituperative polemicist, who once in a poem about Lenin said that he didn't mind who was killed, as long as the millennium came—is also, in person, the gentlest, most courteous of men. And so on. In these contradictions he is very Scottish, and his career as a poet and man is either Scotland's glory or Scotland's tragedy.

As I've said, there is a great book to be written about it. Duncan Glen's *Hugh MacDiarmid* is not that book, but then it did not set out to be. What we have is a painstaking account of Christopher Grieve's activity as a literary man. Here are his early struggles to establish the use of Scots in verse; his opinions about Scottish culture, his flytings with such opponents (sometime friends) as Maurice Lindsay and Edwin Muir. The account of Grieve's life that is given here is minimal; just the facts, with a mere indication of the depths behind. The account of his writings is sketchy; there is practically no criticism. Glen is especially concerned to trace the "Scottish Renaissance," as the title of his book suggests, so we cannot blame him for what is not here. Yet I think that it would have been more useful to criticize the writings of the new Scots poets in some detail, so as to give the quality of the Renaissance, than to make a record of their dealings with publishers, their broadcasts, and so on. American critics are ridiculed in Britain for their exhaustive attention to everything, and their unnecessarily close readings—but this book shows that British writing about literature could use a few lessons from America. This is not to say that MacDiarmid's poetry is not quoted, or that Glen does not summarize his ideas—but there is practically no examination of important matters such as the change from MacDiarmid's lyrics in Scots to his late, massive poems in English. There is practically no discussion of MacDiarmid's aesthetics—and, after all, he is a poet first, a literary man second.

I've said that I think he is the most important living British poet. I don't mean simply that MacDiarmid is a national monument, though he is that. I mean also that his poems deserve serious critical attention.

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

They have not begun to have it on any scale proportionate to their deserving. MacDiarmid is surely one of the most uneven poets who have ever written; I cannot read his didactic poems, which you would think had been written in the Victorian period, except that the references are to Stalin rather than to God. But also he has written superbly intellectual poems, and lines of pathos, humor, delicate lyricism. If he had been English—which is impossible—what honors would have been heaped on his head!

Duncan Glen's book is an introduction to the subject, and should prove useful to the man who will some day write the definitive life. A Scottish Boswell.

LOUIS SIMPSON

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Francis Collinson. *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*. Nashville, Tenn. Vanderbilt University Press. 1966. xvii + 294 pp. \$8.95.

The number and variety of specialist fields necessarily represented in a study of the Traditional and National Music of Scotland is such that it is hardly surprising that Mr. Collinson's book is the first to attempt such a survey. Let it be said at the outset, therefore, that the musical and non-musical historian, the ethnomusicologist and the scholars in such fields as Celtic studies and Lowland Scots poetry and music will all be somewhat dissatisfied with portions of this book. But the accumulation of a good deal of information and copious musical examples and references in this broad subject was a task well worth tackling, and one in which Mr. Collinson, with his practical experience as a Scots folk-song collector, had much to offer: indeed, very many of the interesting music examples which are the most valuable contribution to this volume, are of the author's own collecting and are now published for the first time.

By "traditional" Mr. Collinson means music which is transmitted aurally and hence includes instrumental as well as vocal music. The term "national," on the other hand, he applies to music "composed, or